

Global Tides

Volume 10

Article 7

1-1-2016

A Question of Sin and Responsibility: Exploring Innocence in Dante

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Recommended Citation

Stephenson, Cassandra (2016) "A Question of Sin and Responsibility: Exploring Innocence in Dante," *Global Tides*: Vol. 10, Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol10/iss1/7>

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Throughout *The Divine Comedy*, Dante employs the word “innocent” in a select few places, using the term specifically to refer to infant “innocents” who died soon after birth. Dante utilizes this label to explain his placement of these children within his spiritual hierarchy—in either Limbo or just below Paradise. What, then, does Dante mean by “innocent”? How does innocence affect how and where these souls are placed? Are these infants free from sin or guilt? It is unlikely that the latter question reflects Dante’s intention, as the doctrine of original sin is thoroughly woven throughout *The Divine Comedy*. Therefore, to address the meaning and the place of innocence in *The Divine Comedy*, this paper will examine Dante’s notion of original sin, his concept of true choice, the power of merit, and the role of ignorance in the structuring of his spiritual hierarchy.

The relationship between Dante’s use of the word “innocence” and his concept of original sin creates a unique discordance that hints at a deeper meaning. In Ante-Purgatory, Dante addresses the sinfulness of infants through Virgil, who states, “There I am with the infant innocents, those whom the teeth of death had seized before they were set free of human sinfulness” (*Purgatorio*. Canto VII. Lines 31-33). From this line, it is clear that, paradoxically, the infants’ souls are both innocent and within the grip of original sin. An additional contrasting idea is put forth in Hell, where Dante hears an explanation of Limbo’s inhabitants from Virgil: “They did not sin; and yet, though they have merits, that’s not enough, because they lacked baptism, the portal of the faith that you embrace” (*Inf.* IV. 34-36). The significance of baptism will be discussed in a subsequent paragraph, but the idea that those in Limbo (including the infants) did not sin does not agree with Dante’s numerous allusions to the original sin of Adam and Eve. For instance, Dante refers to human souls as the “evil seed of Adam” (*Inf.* III. 115), and the text later states, “[Dante] wears the weight of Adam’s flesh as dress, despite his ready will, is slow in his ascent” (*Purg.* XI. 43-45). How can the mutual existence of innocence and original sin be reconciled?

Dante places emphasis on the infants’ burden of original sin, yet he also writes that these infants, who have been placed in Limbo, have not sinned. In Dante’s view, then, while the infants did not sin of their own accord or choices, they still inherently carry the weight of Adam and Eve’s sins, which hinders them from ascending to Paradise. This is illustrated through Dante’s perspective on the relationship between sin and salvation: human souls, including these children, are naturally inclined towards God’s light. However, individuals who maintain sinful livelihoods drift away from God as their sinful behavior separates them from their Creator. Though the infants do not yet have knowledge of their sin or the means to act or choose (it is clear that they are placed in the spiritual hierarchy “for merits not their own”), they are still drawn toward Him, as “all are drawn and draw to God” (*Par.* XXVIII. 129). Alternatively, or perhaps concurrently, it is also possible that the infants sinned simply by not knowing God. This idea is difficult to reconcile with the line that specifies “they did not sin,” but it also points to a different

understanding of sin itself. Sin may not be entirely linked to the conscious choices or actions of individuals, but rather inherent in their being or existence—something they did not or could not choose—hence the concept of original sin. The infants did not sin through action by turning away from God, but they also did not turn toward him, and their inherent original sin places them further from God despite their innocence in terms of choice.

The idea that infants do not have true choice is one possible explanation for their “innocence.” In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante places one group of infants just below Paradise, stating that they are there due to both the merits of others and the infants’ lack of true choice. Thus, the infants’ “innocence” might be a reference to their never having free choice to turn toward God or away from Him: “And know that there, below the transverse row that cuts across the two divisions, sit souls who are there for merits not their own, but—with certain conditions—others’ merits; for all of these are souls who left their bodies before they had the power of true choice” (*Par.* XXXII. 40-45). The infants were not yet able to choose for themselves or have their own merits, so their parents were left to decide for them in issues such as baptism and circumcision. These infants lack a power that others possess—choice—and this factor sets them apart from other souls. Despite being born with original sin like the rest of humanity, these young souls never had the opportunity to address their innate sinfulness or commit their own voluntary sins. These infants were not able to make the decision to turn toward God, but neither did they choose a life of sin; they were therefore innocent of choice. This innocence of choice—in combination with their parents’ choices—results in their placement in either Limbo or just below Paradise.

Saint Augustine, whose views influenced Dante’s work, presents a comparable viewpoint when he discusses infant selfishness in *Confessions*. Augustine seemingly denounces the idea of infant innocence, echoing the presence of original sin in infants by quoting Job 14:4-5: “[N]one is pure from sin before you, not even an infant of one day upon the earth” (9). Augustine furthers his argument about the sinful nature of infants, stating “the feebleness of infant limbs is innocent, not the infant’s mind” (9). He then illustrates this using an example of infant jealousy as two babies fight for their mother’s milk: “But it can hardly be innocence, when the source of milk is flowing richly and abundantly, not to endure a share going to one’s blood-brother, who is in profound need, dependent for life exclusively on that one food” (Augustine 9). This example supports the argument that infants are *not* innocent and are instead capable of selfishness—and therefore sinful. However, Augustine closes his discussion on infancy with a statement that skews the implication of these claims:

If ‘I was conceived in iniquity and in sins my mother nourished me in her womb’ (Ps. 50:7), I ask you, my God, I ask, Lord, where and when your servant was innocent? But of that time I say nothing more. I feel no sense of responsibility now for a time of which I recall not a single trace. (10)

Augustine struggled with the idea of innocence, especially since he did not feel responsible for his actions when he had no memory of these actions. This demonstrates that Augustine views the selfish actions of infants as some type of primal drive rather than a conscious choice of turning away from God. Augustine's influence on Dante regarding this theology, then, is evident, as Dante alludes to Esau and Jacob, who fought in their mother's womb before birth (an act demonstrating their capability for selfishness), concluding that, "it is just for the celestial light to grace their heads with a becoming crown" (*Par.* XXXII. 70-71). Despite their potentially sinful actions, they are still innocent and justly crowned. Dante's comments on the topic of infants expand on the initial questions of Augustine, producing a similar yet unique perspective.

As aforementioned, the placement of infants in Dante's hierarchy is heavily dependent on their parents' choices for them—in other words, the merit of others. This reveals that the infants' innocence is not enough to save them or determine their proximity to God, because they could not turn toward the God they did not know. In *Paradiso*, Dante writes, "without, then, any merit in their works, these infants are assigned to different ranks—proclivity the only difference" (XXXII. 73-75). The children themselves were unable to have any merit because they were unable to do any conscious works, so the burden falls to those who cared for them. This has a large impact on where they are placed in the spiritual hierarchy; their parents' decisions predestined the children to either just below Paradise or in Limbo. The influence of parental choice is further explained when Dante elaborates on what constitutes merit on the parents' part:

In early centuries, their parents' faith alone, and [the infants'] innocence, sufficed for the salvation of the children; when those early times had reached their completion, then each male child had to find, through circumcision, the power needed by his innocent member; but then the age of Grace arrived, and without perfect baptism in Christ, such innocence was kept below, in Limbo. (*Par.* XXXII. 76-84)

This explanation demonstrates how important merit is in determining the fate of the infant's soul, but it also shows how, though the definition of sufficient merit shifted over time, innocence of the infants remained constant throughout. Additionally, even those children placed farther away from Paradise in Limbo retain their innocence—it is simply "kept below." Though merit is important in the hierarchy, it is not solely responsible, and innocence is independent of merit.

Furthermore, infant souls are not punished with pain or physical suffering as are others, even in Limbo. Virgil says that he is placed with the infants in a realm of a different form of suffering than shown in *Inferno*:

There is a place below that only shadows—not torments—have assigned to sadness; their lament is not an outcry, but a sigh. There I am with the infant innocents, those whom the teeth of death had seized before they were set free of human sinfulness; there I am with those

souls who were not clothed in the three holy virtues—but who knew and followed after all the other virtues. (*Purg.* VII. 28-36)

This shows that the merit of their parents' choices of baptism and circumcision held import in the eyes of God, but merit alone was not the only factor determining the infants' eternal place in the hierarchy. Merit means the difference between Limbo and Paradiso, but the infants are still not punished as harshly as those judged for their own merit.

Tangential to the importance of merit's relationship to innocence is the concept of ignorance, as seen in the other non-infant souls dwelling in Limbo. In Limbo live those worthy souls who were not baptized or lived before the time of Christ. They are placed here because they are virtuous in their own right (or in the infants' case, virtuous by others' merits), although they did not pursue their faith in God fully on their own accord. These souls were virtuous but did not know God and could therefore not turn toward Him because of this. Their placement in Limbo suggests that ignorance was taken into account in deciding their place; although ignorance weighs these souls down and pulls them farther from God, it does not damn them to the deepest and most punishing depths of Hell. Dante writes:

They did not sin; and yet, though they have merits, that's not enough,
because they lacked baptism, the portal of the faith that you embrace.
And if they lived before Christianity, they did not worship God in
fitting ways ... For these defects, and for no other evil, we now are lost
and punished just with this: we have no hope and yet we live in
longing. (*Inf.* IV. 34-42)

Infants are held partially accountable for not knowing of God or baptism, in addition to their parents' ignorance or ignorant choices. Those who lived before Christianity (Greek and Roman heroes and philosophers, including Aeneas, Hector, Virgil, Socrates and Plato) are similarly affected by their lack of knowledge of the one true God. In *The Republic*, Plato defines ignorance with the statement: "Knowledge, then, is of what is and ignorance necessarily is of what is not" (169). The philosophers and infants did not know God, making them ignorant, though due to no action or choice on their part. Plato's work, which also influenced Dante's worldview, interpreted ignorance as evil and unjust (48-49). In combination with Dante's other ideas, the concept of ignorance as evil helps explain why it would cause those who otherwise lived virtuous lives to sink further from Paradise and from God, though his light still reaches them, as "the light of God so penetrates the universe according to the worth of every part, that no thing can impede it" (*Par.* XXXI. 22-24). The light of God and baptism bring the infants, philosophers, and heroes alike out of Hell. They are still separated from God, however, due to original sin and their ignorance of God, even if these souls are not completely responsible for this ignorance.

Notwithstanding the complex web of meanings of Dante's idea of innocence, it is evident that the use of innocence as a placement tool is important to understanding Dante's work as a whole. Dante's definition of

innocence and its role in the heavens is nuanced by its relation to original sin, choice, merit, and ignorance. Innocence, when examined through each of these lenses, can be seen to be made up of a lack of choice and, perhaps more importantly in Dante's worldview, a lack of knowledge about God. Innocence in conjunction with merit and original sin, which is a simple fact of existence, determines how far the "infant innocents" are placed from God. Dante addresses any questions concerning the placement of the infants in the text itself: "Whatever you may see has been ordained by everlasting law, so that the fit of ring and finger here must be exact; and thus these souls who have, precociously, reached the true life do not, among themselves, find places high or low without some cause" (*Par.* XXXII. 55-60). This statement demonstrates that the placement of the infants in the hierarchy was entirely intentional, based on cause and ordained by everlasting law. It serves to highlight the significance of any placement factors, including innocence—a testament to the idea that there is worth in pursuing the question.

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